

Verda Welcome, pioneering state lawmaker, dies

By Joe Nawrozki
Evening Sun Staff

Verda Freeman Welcome, who rose from modest beginnings on a truck farm in North Carolina to become the first black woman state senator in the United States, died yesterday at Liberty Medical Center in West Baltimore. She was 83.

According to Kathy Weller, clinical director at the hospital, Welcome was brought into Liberty at 10:26 a.m. and was pronounced dead at 10:33 a.m. She had been in failing health for some time and no specific cause of death was given. **EVENING**

Services are scheduled for 10 a.m. Thursday at Grace Presbyterian Church, 2604 Banister Road in Baltimore.

Welcome retired from public life in 1982 after serving 25 years in the State House, first as a delegate then as state senator.

One of the experiences she brought to public life was that of a little girl growing up in Uree, N.C., an area now known as Lake Lure.

She saw her father turned away from the polls by a white adolescent poll worker, an experience that led her to tell her family, "When I grow up, I'm going to vote!"

Indeed, Verda Welcome grew up, voted, and helped others to gain equality in the voting booth.

She never forget the stinging rejection of racism. She was denied restaurant privileges and given a room in the basement of an Ocean City Hotel while attending a Young Democrats' convention.

As a result of that experience, she would later push through the Maryland legislature the Public Accommodations Bill, upholding the dignity of all people to rent a room or have a meal wherever they chose.

"She led the way for other black

people to enter into politics and run for the legislature," said Helen Dale, a family friend who works for the Maryland Office on Aging. "She encouraged their participation in the political process."

Welcome was born in 1907 on a truck farm high in the Blue Ridge Mountains. She was one of a family of 16 brothers and sisters.

She received a bachelor's degree in history from Morgan State College in Baltimore and went on to earn a master's degree from New York University in 1943.

Welcome worked for 11 years as a teacher in the Baltimore City schools and, after making the decision to enter politics, was elected to the House of Delegates in 1958 as a Democrat.

In 1962, she earned a seat in the state Senate by defeating the Jack Pollack political machine in the 4th District. She built her own organization and remained a state senator for 20 years.

As a senator, Welcome helped vote down the state's century-old miscegenation law, sponsored bills establishing equal pay for equal work and voter registration by mail, and was instrumental in the passage of a measure that provided \$4.8 mil-

lion to help build Provident Hospital.

She later would recount that tremendous progress was made in those days, "but it's different now; the bills I introduced were the kinds of legislation we shouldn't have had to introduce in the first place."

Welcome helped pass legislation dealing with gun control and anti-smoking. She also led the successful fight when Morgan State received university status. **EVENING SUN**

She twice was the victim of crime. In 1963, she was shot and wounded shortly after her election to the Maryland Senate. In 1975, she was mugged, beaten on the head and robbed near her office in the 3500 block of Holmes Ave.

Welcome was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the United Negro College Fund and Americans for Democratic Action.

She was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1968, 1972 and 1976.

Her husband, Dr. Henry Cecil Welcome, died in 1979. Survivors include her daughter, Mary Sue Welcome; a grandson, Gregory Welcome Mercer; and 12 brothers and sisters.